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The influence of pedagogical approaches on overcoming fear of water in early school-aged children

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Abstract

This article examines the problem of overcoming fear of water in early school-aged children. It analyzes the biological, psychological, social, and age-related aspects of water fear that create barriers to a child's development. Various pedagogical approaches aimed at reducing anxiety, building confidence, and adapting children to the aquatic environment are explored. Classic methods, such as step-by-step instruction and adaptive training, are described, along with innovative approaches, including the use of virtual reality technologies, game-based elements, and positive reinforcement pedagogy. Examples of the successful application of these methods are provided to confirm their effectiveness.

Keywords: Fear of water, pedagogical approaches, early school age, game-based methods, swimming training

1. Introduction

Water fear in early school-age children is a pressing issue in contemporary pedagogy and psychology. The age range of 6 to 10 years is marked by intense physical and psycho-emotional development, and thus it is necessary for children to overcome some barriers to ensure their harmonious personal development. Aquaphobia can significantly limit the involvement in physical activities, negatively affect self-confidence and self-esteem, and restrict active involvement in educational and recreational activities with aquatic environments.

The causes of fear in children of water are multifaceted. Individual developmental characteristics, past negative experience, environmental circumstances, and psychological and pedagogical under-preparation are such causes. To them, the complex approach is required, comprising adaptive pedagogic methods of compensation for available restrictions concerning the aquatic environment. Modern pedagogic models imply sufficient potential for cooperation with the child with fear of water. The use of game-based technologies, step-by-step instruction methods, and individualized approaches helps to create a comfortable and safe environment, fostering trust in water and gradually reducing anxiety. The purpose of this work is to study the influence of pedagogical approaches on overcoming fear of water in early school-aged children.

2. Main part. Causes and features of fear of water in early school-aged children

Water phobia in young school-age children is a multifactorial phenomenon due to the interaction of biological, psychological, and social determinants. During this age phase, there is active forming of cognitive functions, emotional regulation, and social adaptation. Nevertheless, children are still susceptible to stressful conditions, including contact with water. Understanding the causes and features of water fear allows for the development of effective pedagogical approaches to overcome it (fig. 1).

At the biological level, the fear of water may be linked to the functioning of a child's sensory and nervous systems. The underwater environment is commonly perceived by the body as foreign, evoking automatic defensive responses. An example is when a child's face is dipped into the water, automatic mechanisms for breath-holding are triggered, which may be

experienced by the child as distress or even hazard. Furthermore, physiological reactivity to changes in the water temperature or pressure on the skin may enhance feelings of apprehension.

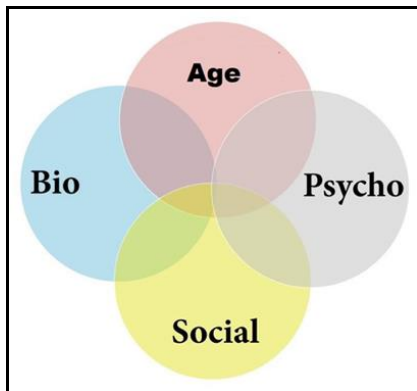


Fig 1: Causes of fear of water.

A lack of confidence in motor coordination also plays a significant role. Early school-aged children have not yet developed the fully-formed motor skills required for swimming. Inadequate strength in muscles and ability to control their body can cause feelings of loss of control in water, exaggerating the sense of fear. Also, in children of this age group, their vestibular system has not developed as required, causing them to become dizzy or lose direction during the swim or even underwater maneuvers.

At the psychological level, the fear of water in early school-aged children is associated with their emotional sensitivity and cognitive immaturity. This period is marked by a strong tendency towards imagination, making children more susceptible to irrational fears^[1]. For example, child may think that the water is uncontrollable or a hazardous place. Other negative experiences of falling into the water, coldness of the water, and unsuccessful attempts to swim may leave a mark on the child's memory and this anxiety could persist as a response.

Catastrophizing is a common psychological characteristic of danger perception in children of this age. For instance, a child might be frightened to drown in a shallow pool since he has no idea about the real degree of risk. A fear is commonly accompanied by indications of physiological fear, e.g., increased rate of heartbeat, tension of muscles, or sense of «lump in throat».

The water fear of the child appears in intensive interaction with the child's social environment. The attitudes of the child towards the water world are highly linked to the child's interaction with parents, teachers, and peers as well. If the parents or adults close to them happen to fear water, then this may well be projected onto the child through activity, non-verbal behavior, and warning. For instance, excessive parental caution may lead the child to view water as inherently dangerous. Moreover, the lack of positive water experiences at young ages can cause negative expectations to develop. Those children who do not frequently visit pools, water bodies, or beaches are not exposed to and accustomed to water as a naturalistic environment^[2]. This can lead to anxiety when they are first required to interact with water. Social pressure from peers may also worsen the issue if the child is ridiculed for their insecurity or fear.

Early school-aged children possess specific age-related characteristics that influence their relationship with water. At this stage, the children are cognitively capable of grasping

simple rules about safety; however, their emotional maturity has not developed enough to help them to control their fears completely. Water has a dual nature in that it is both a place for fun and games as well as something dangerous.

A further risk factor regarding the development of water fear in children is lacking self-regulation skills. During states of stress, children take refuge in the protection of adults. If the child does not receive necessary support or faces excessive demands, his or her fear will increase, and contact with water may be associated with insecurity or helplessness.

Thus, water fear in early school age is the result of the complicated interaction of biological, psychological, social, and age features. The characteristics of the child at this age contribute to greater sensitivity to new sensations, cognitive immaturity, and dependence on the social environment. Understanding these aspects is essential for developing pedagogical approaches aimed at successfully overcoming the fear of water.

2.1. Review of pedagogical approaches to overcoming fear of water in early school-aged children

Range of pedagogical procedures for eliminating early school-aged children's fear of water is an aftermath of compulsion to pay not only for generalized age-characteristics but for specific characteristic of each child. Those procedures are varied from typical ones based on gradual education and training to innovative ones based on play, creativity, and individually adjusted procedures. Collectively, all of them make a diverse array of measures aimed at dispelling children's phobia towards water.

Classical pedagogical methods of working with children who have a water fear are based on the principle of gradual progression. Gradual swimming lessons involve introducing the child to the aquatic environment step by step, with tasks increasing in complexity progressively. The child learns first to experience water as a manageable and secure environment, starting from shallow water or the pool edge. It entails basic activities, such as inserting hands in water, observing it flowing, or attempting to submerge the face underwater.

Adaptive training is aimed at creating a pleasant physical and emotional environment for the child. Cyclical movements and well-organized exercises, such as breathing exercises and simple movements in water, are employed in these trainings to allow the child to gradually adapt to the aquatic environment. The teacher must strictly manage the rhythm of the process, avoiding sudden changes that would intensify the anxiety of the child^[3]. The main advantage of this technique is its universality since it can be applied to most children regardless of the intensity of their phobias.

Game-based methods are a powerful tool for overcoming fear of water in children. Through playing exercises, the child becomes less nervous because they concentrate on fascinating activities rather than frightening stimuli. Playing awakens a child's natural curiosity and stimulates the development of favorable attitudes to water. For example, children can be provoked to search for something in water, build «water castles», or assume roles of sea animals.

The game format not only supports the friendly atmosphere but also motivates the child to take an active role in voluntary activities for fear overcoming. Another key ingredient of such methods is the motivation and appreciation of the efforts of the child, which boost their confidence. Teachers should keep in mind that the success of game-based methods also depends on the cooperation and comfort of the child. Game abuse, such as giving them inappropriately difficult or intimidating

tasks, can have the opposite effect of increasing anxiety.

Creative methods involve using elements of art and imagination to foster a positive attitude toward water in children. Music, storytelling, and role-playing games help the child perceive water through the lens of artistic imagination, reducing their fear^[4]. For example, sessions may include calming, soft music that helps children relax and associate water with a comfortable setting.

Role-playing games provide the child with a chance to participate in an interesting experience where they play roles of adventurous explorers, ocean captains, or swimmers. It diverts the child's eye from fear and focuses it on playing a game role. The uniqueness of creative methods is that they can be adapted: teachers can adapt situations to specific children's tastes and phobias, proposing individualized exercises for overcoming emotional barriers.

An individualized approach requires a thorough analysis of the child's personal characteristics and experiences. Anxiety towards water can take different forms, from mild unease to intense phobia; hence, pedagogical intervention should be responsive to the extent of fear, the cause of the fear, and the child's own personality. The teacher initially creates a trusting relationship to create a sense of security and support. At this stage, one should consider the child's emotional state and not rush the process, as this could amplify anxiety.

Significant attention in individualized approaches is given to verbalizing fears. The teacher helps the child express and discuss their feelings, which alleviates emotional tension. For example, a child might describe what specifically frightens them about water, and the teacher can explain why it does not pose a threat. Visualization techniques are also widely used, where the child imagines themselves confidently swimming or playing in the water. Psychological support is an integral part of the individualized approach. Teachers use elements of motivation and positive reinforcement, emphasizing the child's successes, no matter how minor they may seem. This approach strengthens the child's confidence in their abilities and reduces the intensity of fear.

A review of pedagogical approaches shows that addressing children's fear of water requires a combination of various strategies. The integrated application of these methods can significantly enhance pedagogical effectiveness, fostering the child's harmonious development and confidence in the aquatic environment. However, despite the effectiveness of traditional and creative methods, advancements in technology and a deeper understanding of child psychology contribute to the emergence of innovative approaches. These approaches go beyond conventional pedagogical practices and offer new solutions aimed at improving the child's adaptation to the aquatic environment (table 1).

Table 1: Innovative approaches for working with children experiencing fear of water^[5, 6]

An innovative approach	Description	Advantages
Virtual reality technologies	Creating a safe simulation of interaction with water, where the child can gradually adapt to the aquatic environment using virtual reality.	Reducing the fear of real contact with water; the possibility of gradual adaptation; control over the complexity of the environment.
The pedagogy of positive reinforcement	A method based on encouraging a child for achievements, creating positive associations with water through praise, support and motivation.	Increasing the child's confidence; creating a comfortable emotional environment; forming a stable interest in swimming.
Group classes	Peer learning to reduce anxiety through behavior modeling, group support, and playful socialization.	Stimulating collective interaction; observing the success of peers; switching attention to teamwork and joint actions.

According to the author, innovative approaches to working with children experiencing fear of water demonstrate significant potential for creating a personalized, comfortable, and effective learning environment. These approaches are aimed at comprehensively addressing the issue of fear through the combination of modern technologies, emotional support, and social adaptation. These methods take into account both the cognitive and emotional characteristics of children, fostering a sustainable motivation for interaction with water. Integrating such approaches into pedagogical practice not only helps overcome fear but also develops a positive attitude toward the learning process.

A sample that confirms the effectiveness of pedagogical procedures is a study conducted within the framework of the American Red Cross Learn-to-Swim program, which focused on swimming lessons and the elimination of water fear in young school-aged children. Children were treated in an eight-week course under conditions that involved gradual habituation to water. Gentle graduated exposure to water, gamification, and positive reinforcement were utilized to reduce anxiety and build confidence among participants. Results showed that 87% of the children overcame their aquaphobia, acquired basic swimming skills, and were keen for additional lessons. The positive atmosphere, the support of the instructors and the group participation played an important role in shaping a favorable perception of the water, confirming the importance of an integrated approach to swimming training^[7].

Another is the Total Immersion method, developed by Terry

Laughlin, which has proven to be extremely effective in the removal of fear of water among young school-aged children. The central focus of this method is to create conditions under which children feel secure and at ease in the water. Teachers teach children to relax, trust the water, and consider it a supportive medium. Gradual transfer of training, starting with most basic exercises in shallow water, excludes stressful factors and lowers anxiety^[8]. Hence, the use of novelty methods in pedagogical activity not only helps successfully overcome fear of water in primary school children, but also contributes to their round-the-clock development, building confidence and positive attitude towards the learning process.

3. Conclusions

Water phobia overcoming in preschool children is an important pedagogical problem, the successful resolution of which ensures the harmonious development, activity, and self-esteem of a child. Pedagogical methods analysis shows that the combination of classical, game-based, and innovative approaches is the most efficient method to resolve this issue. Gradual progress, emotional support, and the creation of a safe environment form a positive water attitude, enabling children to acquire required skills and reduce the anxiety level.

Examples of programs prove that a systematic approach, e.g., individualization, game elements, and positive reinforcement, can play an important role in the effectiveness of work with children. The synthesis of new technologies and group socialization also makes them more confident and interested

in swimming education. Pedagogical techniques, as a result, not only allow for overcoming fear of water but also contribute to the comprehensive development of children, forming self-confidence and interest in communication with the world around.

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